

FOR: A SEMANTIC POTENTIAL

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ABSTRACT. *For: A Semantic Potential.* The preposition *for* is attributed a total of nine different senses and 27 sub-senses by the Oxford English Dictionary. It is possible to determine one meaning that explains all observed usage allowing for a word's two different states: (1) as a semantic potential allowing for a range of possible senses and (2) in actual use, which is one sense expressed out of all of the possibilities. This paper will demonstrate how through the organization of authentic examples, an organization influenced by Cadiot's work on the French preposition *pour*, that the highly polysemous *for* can be reduced to one semantic potential. This semantic potential will be characterized by using both a diagram and a description of how this diagram is to be interpreted.

Keywords: *monosemy, polysemy, schematicity, image schemas, semantic potential*

REZUMAT. *For: un potențial semantic.* Prepoziția *for* înregistrează în total nouă sensuri diferite și 27 de subsensuri în *Oxford English Dictionary*. Este posibil să i se atribuie un sens care să explice toate întrebunțările observate dacă se disting două stări diferite ale cuvântului: (1) o stare potențial semantică permițând o gamă de sensuri posibile în limbă și (2) în utilizarea reală într-un discurs, unde nu este exprimat decât un sens dintre toate posibilitățile. Acest articol tinde să arate, prin studierea unor exemple autentice – un studiu influențat de demersul lui Cadiot asupra prepoziției franceze *pour* – că potențialul semantic al prepoziției polisemantice *for* poate fi redus. Acest potențial semantic va fi caracterizat prin utilizarea unei scheme și a unei descrieri în acord cu modul de interpretare a schemei propuse.

Cuvinte cheie: *monosemie, polisemie, schematic, imagine, scheme, potențial semantic*

1. Introduction

Fundamental to the proper treatment of polysemy is a view of a word's meaning existing in two different states. According to Hirtle (2007a: 22), "we

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must always keep in mind language's two modes of existence, the potential and the actual, ability and speech (or text)." In this respect, Evans (2009: 71-72) draws an analogy between semantics and phonology, pointing out that just as phonemes are never perceived directly, but rather only allophones, so "lexical concepts are never actually realized *in toto*; rather, it is only the contextually relevant aspects which surface in language use." Polysemy, thus, can be explained by taking the position that a word's meaning is both permanent, having a potential that is unobservable, and variable, as observed in actual use. As a result, it is possible to determine one meaning that explains all observed usage allowing for a word's two different states: (1) as a potential allowing for a range of possible senses and (2) in actual use, which is one sense expressed out of all of the possibilities. In this way, it is assumed that monosemy describes a word's state as it exists as a potential in tongue while polysemy can be applied to the actualizations observed in discourse.

It will be proposed that a schematic potential meaning explains the entire network of related senses of *for* because the schematic meaning potential is derived from all uses of *for*, not one particular, or prototypical use. It is not possible to derive all the uses of a word from one particular, or prototypical use, as this constitutes deriving effects from other effects and not from the causes on which they depend for their existence. Thus it is argued that each word has its own make-up, or mental representation, independent of and prior to its utterance in any particular sentence and is not dependent upon the context evoked by the sentence for its meaning, but instead contributes meaning to the sentence. Meaning, it should be pointed out, does not refer directly to reality, but instead to the speaker's experience of reality, since the external world has to first be mentally experienced by the speaker before it can be represented mentally and talked about. The potential meaning of *for* corresponds to a mental process whose locus of existence is in the mind, as with all words. Duffley (2006: 24) states with respect to the preposition *of* that "there is absolutely nothing (in the external world) that can be pointed to as corresponding to this preposition," so that *of* in the phrase *the city of London* evokes a "mental process whereby one aspect of London has been extracted from the full notion, in this case the aspect of being a city."

The position taken in this paper is that *for* contributes a meaning in all its uses, even in the complementizer function, or *for...to* constructions, where it implies future-oriented or forward-looking directionality in the form of the ear-marking of an event for a prospective subject. *For*'s semantic contribution was also discerned in usage with verbs expressing various forms of future orientation such as desire, request, effort or purpose. After careful observation and analysis, it was hypothesized that *for* represents a movement bringing into association two entities such that one entity comes to occupy the space

belonging to the other. When combined with contextual factors, this unspecified potential can give rise to four main types of expressive effect, those of exchange, attribution, obtaining and matching.

Comprehensive studies of usage, “cannot rely on intuition, anecdotal evidence, or small samples; they rather require empirical analysis of large databases of authentic texts, as in the corpus-based approach.” (Biber et al 1998: 9) This corpus analysis corresponds to a qualitative approach in that individual authentic examples, over 2000, were examined supporting a scientific approach using the method of induction, going from observing particular uses with specific individual examples to the general level, at which a hypothesis is formulated to explain all of the particular facts found in the data.

2. Determining *For*'s Potential Schematic Meaning

The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC) provided most of the authentic texts analyzed for this study. As one of the most frequently occurring prepositions, there is no lack of available data, indeed the problem is organizing the examples in such a way as to observe differences that could be attributed to the meaning of individual words. It is for this reason that Cadiot's (1991) organization of examples in analyzing the French preposition *pour* with verbs signifying movement was adopted. Interpreting the results of examples of *for* with verbs signifying movement involves observing the types of noun phrases that occur with verbs of movement when construed with *for* and contrasting these observations with the data found with the same verbs when construed with the semantically related preposition *to*. While there is not always a one-to-one relationship between the use of *for* and the French equivalent *pour*, Cadiot (1991) brings to light certain points worthy of note that will be useful in examining usage with *for* after verbs signifying movement. The organization of the examples was therefore be based on Cadiot's three semantic categories: “(a) les verbes de direction ... (b) les verbes de mouvement intrinsèque (qui décrivent un mouvement en lui-même)... (c) les verbes de mouvement du corps.” (1991: 48) Consequently, verbs of movement occurring with *for* have been divided into:

(a) **verbs of direction:** *go, arrive, depart, head, return, come, set out, set off,*

set sail, bound, travel

(b) **verbs of manner-specified movement:** *run, walk, wander, stray, march, fly,*

dash, rush, climb, slip, skid, scurry

(c) **verbs of bodily movement:** *reach, stoop, bend down*

Furthermore, according to Cadiot (1991), these three classes can be distinguished with respect to semantic properties that are either coded explicitly or implied pragmatically. For example, Cadiot (1991: 48) notes:

Dans un mouvement, il y a en effet un point de départ <PD>, un point d'arrivée <PA>, une trajectoire <T> et une qualité ou modalité du mouvement <QM>. ... On peut caractériser les classes (a) à (c) en fonction de celles de ces caractéristiques qu'ils codent explicitement, les autres propriétés étant impliquées au terme de la notion même de mouvement.

Should the 'PA', or destination of the subject with respect to the verb of movement, be coded by the verb itself, then according to Cadiot (1991: 49) this class requires a complement introduced by *à* in French or *to* in English as in (a). However, this is not the case with *pour* because "... *pour* n'est pas agréé pour exprimer le PA, codé par le sémantisme d'un verbe de direction." (1991: 47) The situation is similar in English: *for* is incapable of expressing the arrival-point implied by a verb of direction such as *arrive*; instead, the preposition *at* is used to express contact with the arrival-point. In example (2) below with *arrive*, *for* expresses the reason for the movement, while in (3) *at* expresses the point of contact or end-point of the movement of arriving.

Other organizations of the numerous examples were grouped according to semantically linked verbs. For example, verbs indicating future-oriented or forward-looking directionality (*crave, hanker, appeal, ask, struggle*) and verbs signifying speech or expression (*argue, plead, speak, preach, etc.*) Table 1 indicates some noun and verb *for* collocations.

The first attempt to describe the mental process signified by *for* was with respect to verbs of movement. Because the data revealed a close association to the preposition *to*, it was first postulated that *for*'s mental process is partly characterized by a forward movement similar to the potential meaning of the preposition *to*, which Duffley postulates to be a "very general notion of movement leading to a point" (2006: 26). The contrastive pair *He ran to the hills* vs. *He ran for the hills* revealed a significant difference between the two prepositions: where *to* implies reaching the hills, with hills being the primary goal, or the end-point of the movement, *for* expressed instead the desire, or intention to reach the hills, with the movement being construed as leading towards a desired result, possibly protection in this case. In general, the analysis of the examples of *for* with verbs of movement indicated that the noun phrase following *for* was not simply the destination of the subject as is the case with *to*; instead the notions of purpose, reason or intention were found to be associated with *for*. This is obvious in the contrast of *went for them* vs. *went to them*, or *come for them* vs. *come to them*, where with *for*, *them* is the

reason or purpose with respect to the movement of the subject, while with *to*, *them* merely indicates destination. Further corpus evidence that the notion of purpose is a significant aspect of *for*'s semantics is that no examples of noun phrases indicating destination were found after the involuntary movement verbs *slip* or *skid* or the aimless-motion verbs *wander* or *stray*. Table 1 is an example of *for* and *to* collocations with the verb *to run*:

TABLE 1: To Run

<i>ran for + noun phrase</i>		<i>ran to + noun phrase</i>	
<i>the door</i>	<i>help</i>	<i>his mother</i>	<i>your reviews</i>
<i>gasping</i>	<i>less than a year</i>	<i>the bureau</i>	<i>London</i>
<i>21 years</i>	<i>the back door</i>	<i>six years</i>	<i>his office</i>
<i>the woods</i>	<i>the interior of the</i>	<i>the corner to mail</i>	<i>the trees</i>
<i>the marsh</i>	<i>ship</i>	<i>his workshop</i>	<i>the stairs</i>
<i>her life</i>	<i>the back seat</i>	<i>the door</i>	<i>the rescue</i>
<i>cover</i>	<i>the door</i>	<i>his grandmother</i>	<i>12 pages</i>
<i>office</i>	<i>the cliff-top</i>	<i>and fro</i>	<i>this house</i>
<i>138 yards</i>	<i>the kitchen</i>		

The next step in determining *for*'s semantic contribution involved the analysis of verbs implying future-oriented or forward-looking directionality, such as verbs of request, effort, purpose or desire. For example, it was determined that *for* provides the link between the verb *appeal* and that which is being requested in the form of direction towards a desired result or achievement. The difference between *appeal for* and *appeal to* was observed, with *to* representing a completed movement such that the referent of the noun phrase following *to* is the recipient of the appeal, while it is not known with *appeal + for* whether that which was appealed for was achieved or obtained. Similarly with *ask + for*, it was determined that *for* expresses the sense of 'in order to obtain'. The verb *struggle + for* demonstrated that the desired result is not necessarily attainable, suggesting that it is not merely an end-point, as would be the case with the preposition *to*, but instead an object which the subject would like to obtain.

After analyzing and grouping the numerous examples found in the corpora, and personal observations, the following conclusions can be made about *for*. First, the largest number of uses relates to purposes, motives and intentions. Furthermore, despite the close semantic relationship to the preposition *to* after verbs of movement, intentionality is associated only with *for*, with the complement of *for* represented as 'intended recipient' or 'intended destination' in contrast to *to*, which expresses 'actual recipient' or 'actual destination'. Secondly, *for* is achievement-oriented rather than goal-oriented and the achievement is driven by purpose and/or reason (perhaps to obtain money, well-being, etc.).

This led to some conclusions about *for*'s potential meaning as bringing to the message an impression of a forward movement leading to a (desired) result, or a resultant situation, with the movement representing a means to achieve the desired end. This converges with Jespersen's (1965: 257) claim that "the original meaning of *for* is 'in order to obtain'." It will be argued here that underlying all of these diverse senses is an abstract meaning-schema (cf. Langacker 1987, 2008) whereby some entity *x* moves from an initial state in which it is not in contact or relation with another entity *y* into a new situation which is the result of the movement or change and in which *x* is closely associated or bonded with *y*. The following diagram attempts to depict this:

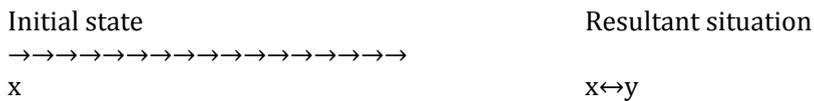


Figure 1

This schema is perhaps most obvious in the example *I got a present for you*, the gift referred to has been bought by the speaker with the intention of giving it to the hearer, and so is meant to move from being in the possession of the speaker to being in that of the person upon whom the speaker intends to confer it. In a diagram:

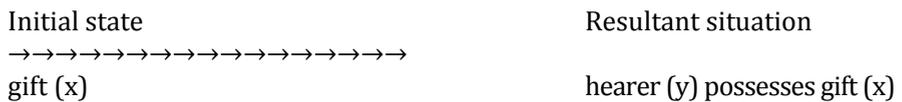


Figure 2

The underlying schematic meaning of *for* is also fairly easy to discern in *they are leaving for London tomorrow*. Here the leaving corresponds to the first stage in a movement which is meant to take the person setting out on the trip to their destination, London:

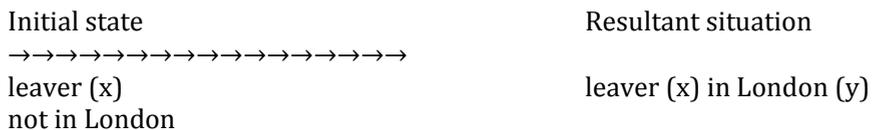


Figure 3

The senses of 'representation' and 'exchange/replacement' described in the *Oxford English Dictionary* also fit into the schema quite readily. In this case, entity *x* moves to take the role or place of entity *y*, either as a representative or

substitute of *y* or as something that *x* obtains in exchange for *y* (i.e. which replaces *y* in *x*'s possession, as when *x* relinquishes a certain sum of money in order to purchase *y*):

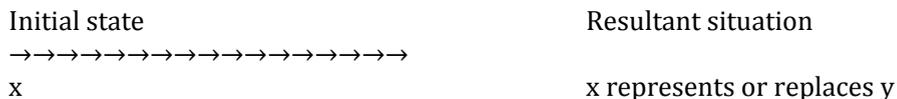


Figure 4

Slightly less obvious is the temporal use of *for*. Unlike the uses just discussed, here the movement in question is not intentional, but corresponds rather to the unfolding of an action or state through a stretch of time. The situation resulting from this movement is an accumulated duration at some point of reference. In a diagram:

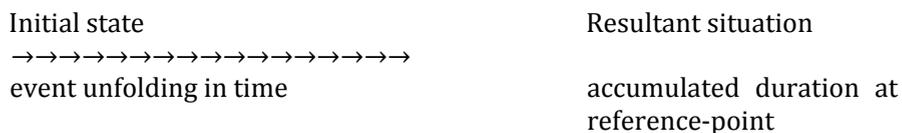


Figure 5

The spatial extension sense is simply the application of this schema to space rather than time, as can be illustrated by the parallel between *He walked for three hours* and *He walked for three miles*.

The use, which the *Oxford Dictionary of English* describes as “indicating an occasion in a series,” also fits in here as well. In this case it is the ordinal numeral that expresses the number of times accumulated in the series at the reference-point. It is significant in this respect that in English we use the present perfect in constructions such as (1):

(1) This is the third time the camcorder has failed.

This is due to the fact that the ordinal numeral *third* evokes the idea of ‘so far, how many times?’ and therefore calls for a verb phrase denoting the result-phase of the series of failures at the present moment, i.e. the number of occurrences accumulated at that point (cf. Hirtle (2007b: 222-225, 232-233) for a general description of the meaning of the present perfect and its application to the related accumulated-duration use).

It is also fairly easy to show that Oxford’s sense (1) ‘in support or favour of’ is of the same type as the sense ‘on behalf of or of benefit to’. Indeed, in the example given for *troops who had fought for Napoleon*, the paraphrase for the sense ‘on behalf of’ would apply quite unproblematically. In sense (1)

what accrues to *y* as a result of the action of fighting is support or favour. Thus in the second example given by Oxford (*they voted for independence in a referendum*) it is the vote of the group of people referred to by the pronoun *they* which is conferred upon independence:

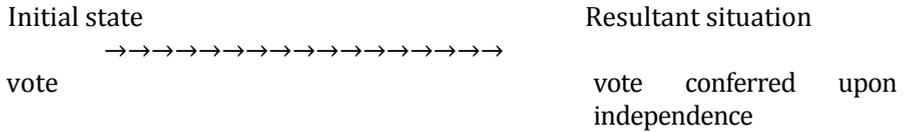


Figure 6

In the example, *she is responsible for the efficient running of their department*, the idea of responsibility implies an association of a task with a person, or more appropriately, the assignment of a person to a task, as illustrated in Figure 7:

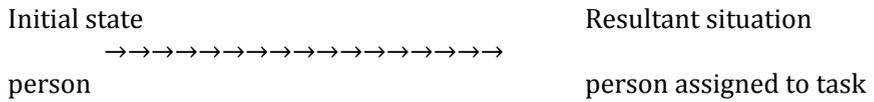


Figure 7

As for the example, *she was tall for her age*, it involves the association of a certain degree of tallness with a certain age. The initial state corresponds here to normal expectations or default assumptions, in which the degree of tallness possessed by the girl is not normally associated with her age. *For* tells you to nevertheless associate that degree of tallness with the girl’s age in spite of it being abnormal to do so. This could be diagrammed as in Figure 8:

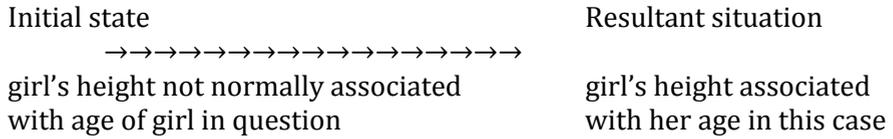


Figure 8

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been demonstrated that the polysemy of the preposition *for* is merely apparent. Underlying all twelve of its main senses (cf OED), plus its use to introduce the subject of an infinitive, the same schematic meaning has been shown to be present. This underlying meaning is not immediately observable, however, as it is obscured by two things. The first of

these is the paraphrase method which must be used in order to describe meaning: the meaning of one word is described by means of other words which by definition do not mean the same thing as the word defined. The second thing is the fact that as a potential the schematic meaning of *for* is stored in the unconscious mind and so is not directly accessible to conscious observation. What can be observed by the conscious mind is only the message conveyed by an utterance containing *for*, and the various paraphrases proposed by dictionaries are in fact merely other means of conveying more or less the same message. The equivalence of the paraphrase to the item paraphrased lies therefore on the level of the end achieved, and not on that of the linguistic means used to achieve this end. It is important in this respect to remember that the fact that two different means lead to the same end does not justify equating the means used to achieve that end. Moreover, in many cases the paraphrases used to describe the meaning of *for* are contaminated by elements that belong to the context. An obvious example of this is the temporal sense, where the idea of a length of time comes from the fact that the object of *for* denotes a period of time, and it suffices to replace the temporal expression by a non-temporal one for this impression to disappear completely:

- (a) She worked for two hours.
- (b) She worked for Apple.

Taking into account the potential/actual and means/ends relationships thus appears highly relevant for the proper treatment of the question of polysemy. Only by looking at a wide range of uses of the same form can the underlying unity be readily discerned, as the analyst can then observe how his paraphrases shade off gradually into one another. Looking at a broad range of data also facilitates the perception of the role of pragmatic factors in order to account for the diversity of the paraphrases associated with one and the same form. Lastly, as Ruhl (1989: 235) says, the analyst must be aware that “a word’s general meaning may not be definable in conscious categories (other than by itself).” In this paper I have attempted to characterize *for*’s schematic meaning by using both a diagram and a description of how this diagram is to be interpreted. I am only too aware that this is not completely adequate as a depiction of the meaning of this preposition (a dynamic video would be one possible improvement on our description that comes to mind). However, I would nonetheless concur with Ruhl (1989: 235) that, in spite of the steepness of the challenge of reconstructing the schematic meaning of a highly versatile word such as *for*, “with abundant data, consciousness can infer the range and the limits of the meaning.”

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